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Green Beret led a team to Libya

By Ben Bradlee
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In July 1977, Luke F. Thompson took an authorized 30-day leave from his duties as a Green Beret master sergeant stationed at Ft. Bragg, in Fayetteville, N.C., and led a team of retired Special Forces soldiers to Libya. The group set up a program to train Libyan commandos in the latest techniques of counterinsurgency warfare.

Now, more than four years later, the question of who authorized Thompson to embark on the mission — which by virtue of the participation of an active-duty member of the Army seemed to bear the imprimatur of the US government — remains unanswered. At least five agencies — the CIA, the FBI, the Justice Department, the Defense Department and the Army — have looked into the Thompson affair, but they are tight-lipped about their conclusions, if indeed any have been reached.

Precisely how Thompson received permission to travel to Libya has taken on significance because the Thompson group is believed to be one of the first of dozens of retired Green Berets and Army ordnance technicians who traveled to Libya from 1976 through at least 1979 to train Libyan commandos and manufacture explosives under a contract between the Libyan leader,

Col. Moammar Khadafi, and two former CIA agents, Edwin P. Wilson and Francis E. Terpil.

Wilson and Terpil were indicted last year in connection with their Libyan dealings and have fled the country. The activities of both men, particularly Wilson, have moved federal officials to call for new laws and regulations governing the actions of retired military and intelligence officials engaged in the transfer abroad of advanced technology, weaponry and specialized skills.

Thompson says that, although he never had the opportunity to inform Army intelligence officials that his ultimate destination was Libya, he had received official permission to go overseas.

Two senior Army officers who served over Thompson at Ft. Bragg in 1977 told The Globe this week they did not approve his going on any overseas assignment and did not learn he had been to Libya until after he returned.

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The specter of Americans training Libyan terrorists may be offensive, but it is not illegal, according to John Russell, a spokesman for the Justice Department.

"We've looked into whether there was a violation of federal statutes in this case, and we've determined that there wasn't," said Russell. "The mercenary laws have holes in them a mile wide, but the key facts in this case seem to be that the Green Berets did not actually enlist in the Libyan army or swear an oath of allegiance to it, and as far as we could determine they did not commit any hostilities toward the United States."

Thompson, a veteran of 19 years in the Special Forces, has told The Globe in interviews over the past nine months that he was initially telephoned about the job the night of July 21, 1977, by Patry E. Loomis, who identified himself as a CIA agent. Concerned that Loomis might actually have been a foreign agent, Thompson notified military intelligence officials at Ft. Bragg of the overture.

Thompson said he was informed by officials whom he declines to identify that the operation was legitimate and that he should go ahead with the plan. He said he assumed he was working for the CIA, which has been known to call upon Green Berets, America's elite commandos, for various missions.

Loomis, it turns out, was technically still on the CIA's payroll at the time, though he and another agent had been dismissed less than three months before by then-CIA chief Stansfield Turner for having helped Wilson in his business dealings.

Thompson said he arranged for four retired Special Forces men that he had served with to go overseas with him. Some of the team members and Thompson convened at the Sheraton Motor Inn in Fayetteville on July 23 to meet Loomis, who brought along his Washington

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